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Ohio State University Commencement

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Thank you for the kind introduction.

I feel I know many of you already.... based on all the e-mails from OSU students with clearly articulated requests for a remodel at the 7th & High Street Kroger store. I fully agree! And, I feel your passion.

First things first, I love OSU

And, I love very much sharing your moment of celebration and recognition.

But best of all.... I love looking straight into the faces of all you who have accomplished so much ... and then contemplating, for a moment, just how you will leave your fingerprints on our world.

I know that every graduate has a story. A story of challenges and disappointments punctuating your successes ...

Today every graduate here celebrates his or her own accomplishment. You did it!

But, there is also a certain “duality” in this celebration ... that no one did it alone ... that help came in lots of forms and packages. It was the encouragement and support from family, friends, faculty and the community that no doubt got you through.

This is a day when “thank you’s” must flow from the heart.... along with all words of congratulations.

A few weeks ago when I received the call from Dr. Holbrook, I thought that I was getting that “from the top” encouragement to put my support for OSU into action and “write a check.” I have been a trustee at two Universities and I understand Stewardship.

But when she asked me to participate in your commencement, I realized that a check would have been easier and a lot less stressful.

The hardest part about today is, of course, which of the many, many very appropriate points of discussion should I choose ...

You already know all about the value of preparation and goal setting. ... (that is what got you here)

You have shown your appetite for knowledge ... and your curiosity.

You have clearly established standards for action and leadership (which are my personal favorites to watch).

As the OSU commercials would suggest....you are ... “Really Smart People Doing Really Smart Things.”

I am a retailer, a marketing person, and a business executive, a person keenly focused on branding. So, not surprisingly, I pay attention to commercials, listen to themes, read billboards

and even read the messages on the sides of trucks. I ponder the meaning of the “unsaid” and enjoy the artistic value of all of it.

So, I suppose it’s not surprising that I love our OSU commercials when they talk about “Really Smart People, Doing Really Smart Things.” And “The Ohio State University, Do Something Great.”

Hearing those creative commercials, I am intrigued, captivated and impressed when a young student like Jerri Sutton describes “ the use of bioactive compounds to modulate insulin sensitivity in gestational diabetes” ... I know that this is someone really smart, doing something really great. In fact, Jeri Sutton is so smart ... that to me ... smart means something I cannot even understand and “something great” is something I could never do.

But the commercials are terrific because they cleverly suggest to all of us that ... you can be smart and greatness is within your reach...if you choose to reach for it!

Defining Moment

I am so often asked ... what was that “defining moment” in my career ... that one specific point at which my future direction became clear. I just cannot answer that question with a particular story or event.

First, I have defining moments daily ... moments that craft, change and adjust my path.

Second, yesterday’s lessons, for me, pale in comparison to the lessons I am learning today.

And, more important for me ... all of those experiences continue to form a defining concept instead of just a moment that influences my decisions, goals and results....

The concept? That “smart” comes from preparation and accomplishing “Great Things” is something I must choose ... Everyday.

Not long ago I spoke to the YWCA in Detroit to an audience of High Achievement Executive Women and YWCA Girls. The young women (of all ages) in that room ... like the graduates in this auditorium ... will accomplish “Great Things” ... Because They Choose To Accomplish Them!

I encouraged the young women to be Smart, and Strong, and Bold ... reminding them that these are qualities that we all possess ... every one of us.

The message to the young women was to recognize that we are not all born with all of these qualities in exactly the right proportion. We are not as smart or as strong or as bold as we wish we were.

What I find so important and exciting is ... that these are qualities that can be learned! Like all of our skills they can be practiced and applied ... and in doing so, they will begin to come more easily.

Fortunately, I was taught this lesson early in life ... to use a “Little Girl” example.... My father believed in practicing everything ... how often did I hear “practice makes perfect” (I’m sure I shattered him with my lack of skill on the piano or maybe he was right ... I didn’t practice enough).

Fortunately for me, he believed ... self-confidence came with practicing self-confidence.

Optional Example:

In our home (as a child), our most distinguished guests were always my father's college professors or politicians who occasionally visited.

My father had a practice of deliberately arriving late on the occasions of those visits. For the first 20 minutes (not 19 and never 21) I was responsible to meet our guest and converse with them. Believe me I always knew what was expected of me.

Sometimes it was a history or theology professor ... and sometimes a person from a political campaign, but clearly they were always people I could learn from if I had the skill and confidence to do so.

It was pretty obvious that Dad was training me with his "baptism by fire" approach.

First, to actually be smart, strong and bold ... and then, to know that I was!

He wanted me to know that the level of my confidence could be strengthened by my own decision to be confident. And using these skills (back to that practical principle of his) would strengthen me.

Dad – and those living room experiences, also taught me something else ... to look at people at "eye level." Never look down ... because he believed that respect belongs to all people ... but he also taught me that ... as you look up, you must first respect yourself.

You have already guessed who my first mentor was. But, I am one of those really fortunate people who stand here today because of the many, many mentors who have invested in me.

The one great gift my mentors gave me was the idea that I could choose to stretch myself ... accomplish more ... think higher ... raise my personal bar ... and to never quit.

Doing Something Great ... What Skills Are Needed.

One of my favorite books ... which was first recommended to me by Coach Jim O'Brien, is the book Good to Great by Jim Collins. Coach O'Brien suggested it to me because Kroger is one of the Good to Great Companies talked about by the author. The book chronicles companies that have found a way to move from good performance to "great." The author measured financial performance generally from the early 1980's to the mid 1990's and then studied why the great performance companies made the transition beyond good.

The book is one of my personal favorites because it includes so many well-articulated business and personal concepts, but nothing is more provocative than the first line of the book ... which reads ...

Good is the enemy of Great!

The author goes on to point out example after example ... and I quote ... “Greatness is not a function of circumstance, Greatness is largely a matter of conscious choice.” In the great companies that *Collins* talks about ...

The best CEO’s were not always the most charismatic.

The Best programs did not always have a specific title.

The best timing was not always immediate.

The “Good to Great” companies didn’t need a larger than life leader putting into play some super impressive business strategy (to which the rest of us today say A’HAH). The “Good to Great” leadership, most importantly, took the time to find the right people. And then encouraged them to choose to reach for greatness beyond themselves.

The most resounding insight for me is that people like companies (and companies are only as good as their people) achieve greatness when ordinary people do extraordinary things. It is the idea that “mere mortals” can and do achieve... greatness.

In my career I have had the pleasure of hiring, promoting, and redirecting thousands of associates. The ones I know have the best edge are not just well prepared for the next step (that is a given), but they are also as ready to learn, as they are to teach.

Success ... what is that one great insight that is the magic ingredient?

The answer is simple ... success... it is a process not an event.

In his book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, *Richard Florida* talks about the 38 million people in this country who make up a new culture that is leading us to a more knowledge-driven economy, an economy resulting not from technology, government and management, but from self-motivated, creative people.

The author points to the view that ... and I quote ... “creative people are the currency of the emerging economic age.”

Florida points out several examples throughout the book that in a truly creative, open environment we must give people permission to fail as they choose to reach for greatness.

What the author suggests is that the Freedom to Fail ... is the key to the process by which we pursue profound accomplishment.

Former Congressman *John Kasick* wrote a book called *Courage is Contagious* and in that book he chronicles ordinary people who do extraordinary things ... He calls it the “Power of One.”

You hold the “Power of One” ...

You are the best prepared ... the most ready ... you don’t have to be born great to do great things ... Success is a process not an event ...

Great things are entirely within you reach ... so CELEBRATE YOUR SUCCESS TODAY... and make the choice to reach for even greater successes tomorrow.